

The Little Epistles of the New Testament - 2

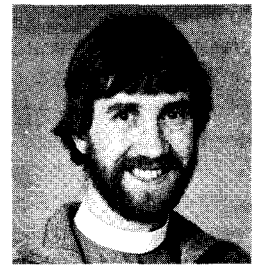
The Second Epistle of John: Truth and Love

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Tiny it may be, but insignificant it is not. 2 John brings before us an issue and a principle of tremendous importance for the church today. How do you cope with error in the Church? And how do you distinguish between error which renders continuing fellowship impossible, and error with which fellowship may coexist? I write as an English Anglican, looking back over two years of particularly intense controversy surrounding the appointment and views of the present Bishop of Durham, who has troubled many by his public doubting and reinterpreting. As a result of the controversy, our Bishops are (at the time of writing) labouring over a statement on the fundamentals of the faith. Somehow I do not think that they are poring over the text of 2 John as they prepare it! And yet this little epistle has so much to teach. Anglicans are not alone in facing problems of this sort. They are perennial - and in fact the reason why 2 John is so relevant to situations like these is precisely because John was facing just such a problem when he tore a sheet of papyrus off his pad and dashed off this note to one of the churches in his care. So tell us, John: what should we do about the Bishop of Durham? Should he continue to love him (v.5)? Or if he turned up on my doorstep in Albury should I turn him away (v.10)?

Those are the alternatives he offers. One commentator (J.L. Houlden) feels that the refusal to offer hospitality in v.10 is sadly inconsistent with the command to love in v.5. Christian love should know no bounds! After all, Christ does not love us because we are acceptable. He loves us in spite of our unacceptability. We will return to Houlden's view below: for the moment, let us just note that John unequivocally sets a limit to the active expression of love. There comes a point, he says, when someone has 'advanced' so far beyond 'the teaching of the Christ' (v.9) that it is no longer possible to extend to them the practical hospitality and fellowship which was the life-blood of the church at that time. Love may still be felt: but, incapable of translation into service, it is not true love, but merely a longing for what once was and can be no more. How does John justify the setting of this point? And where in fact does he set it? Let us look through the epistle to seek answers to these questions.

Stephen Motyer continues his series devoted to the 'little epistles' of the New Testament



Vv.1-3 Greetings

His one-page note begins in conventional style, but there are several remarkable features of this opening greeting. Firstly, he does not name himself, but uses the title by which presumably he was known throughout the area - 'the elder'. It looks as though he exercised oversight over quite a number of churches (probably all in and around Ephesus). Neither does he name his addressees: although some have felt that he was writing to an individual 'lady', almost certainly this address is a winsome way of referring to one of the local churches on his 'patch'. We are all the Bride of Christ! (Yes, even when we are divided and estranged from Him ...).

Secondly, it's vital to note the emphasis on, and relationship between, 'love' and 'truth' in these verses. It sets the scene for the whole letter. Verses 1 and 2 contain a moving expression of his love for the whole church; but he makes it clear (a) that 'the truth' forms the context within which his love is felt and exercised (v.1a); (b) that 'the truth' is that which motivates and promotes mutual love between believers (v.1b); and (c) that this is because 'the truth' is not just a body of knowledge but an active principle which indwells and transforms the heart as well as the head (v.2). This third point is worth dwelling on. It depends on the fact that Greek did not have separate words for 'truth' and 'truthfulness'. When John speaks of the truth 'abiding in us', he does not just mean that our minds have learned to distinguish the truth from error or from counterfeit. Within Biblical thought, the mind cannot be separated off from the rest of the person. If a man has grasped the truth (or been grasped by it), then it will

become 'truth in the inward parts' (Psalm 51:6), touching and transforming his whole personality, and becoming a quality ('truthfulness') within him.

This is why John can add that the truth 'will be with us for ever' (v.2b): for it is comparatively easy to change your mind about something, but you can never change your whole heart. The truth of the Gospel does not *lodge* in us. It acquires a permanent freehold on our minds and hearts - it's there for keeps! And hearts united by the common possession of this truth will be joined to each other in love - how could it be otherwise? This love is not gooey sentiment; in fact it altogether transcends all the normal criteria of human attraction. It is an intellectual bonding, a oneness expressed in mutual self-giving, because the Truth is a person who gave himself for us and now indwells us, and his Father is Love.

And because this truth *will* be with us for ever, the usual prayer with which these opening greetings often conclude (*cf.* e.g. 1 Pet.1:2) is transformed into an expression of certainty: 'Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, *will* be with us, in truth and love!' (v.3). The last phrase is surprising, just tacked on the end. In what sense does John intend it? Are 'truth and love' the *means by which* the blessings of grace, mercy and peace will express themselves in the experience of God's people? Either way, they are absolutely vital, and completely inseparable, and utterly assured!

So the first message 2 John has for churches facing controversy and schism is - nothing can overcome the power of the truth! Once indwelling in you, nothing will dislodge it (him) from its seat. However threatened the church of Christ may appear, her faithfulness is eternally assured. Very encouraging! This thought carries us into the next three verses.

Vv.4-6 Truth and love - together an impregnable fortress

An encouraging encounter (v.4) leads into an exhortation (v.5) which in turn requires an explanation (v.6). Verse 4 suggests the precise occasion of the letter - John has been visited by some members of one of the (?outlying) churches in his area, and he is dashing off a note for them to take back with them to the rest of the church, to prepare them for a personal visit by him (v.12). Reading between the lines, what they had told him had caused him grave concern. For he is only able to report his joy that *some* of them were 'walking in the truth' (v.4). He *hopes* that, following his projected visit, 'our joy may be complete' (v.12) - i.e. that he may discover that his fears about the rest of the church are unfounded, or that by his visit he may be able to rescue the rest of the church from potential disaster. One is tempted to skip on to verses 7-11 to discover the cause of this concern, but it is important to take things in John's order. What pathos there is in the 'some of' (v.4)! And yet John's rejoicing is genuine. His thoughts do not immediately turn to the 'rest of' who are in danger of abandoning the Gospel, but on those in whom the truth is firmly fixed. There's a message there, too! Let's first thank God for the positive

signs of his Spirit, before we start to worry about the negative activities of the Enemy.

His first tactic is to appeal to the (possibly errant) church for a *new mutual love* (v.5). Having written what he did in his greeting, it is easy to see why this is. If the church, in obedience to the oldest command of all (see 1 John 3:11 - it's at the heart of the Gospel) will renew their Christian love towards him, God's apostle and representative, then that will in itself signify their continuance in the truth. And it won't just signify it - it will bolster and reinforce it. We must remember what sort of love John has in mind. It is not concern for another's good. He wants far more than that the church should write back with the message, 'Of course we love you, John - what can we do to help you? Are you in any need we can meet?'. He wants to hear that they still feel themselves bound to him by the cords of Christ, who is himself the Truth and who unites his children to himself and to each other.

That is why he continues as he does in verse 6. What he said about truth in vv.1-3, he says here about *obedience*. For truth is something to be obeyed: it is not just to be believed, but also put into practice (*cf.* John 3:21). Obedience to God's commands is related to love exactly the same way as truth. John is thinking broadly in v.6a, of their whole life of Christian discipleship. If that is on the rails, then all will be well; but if they are no longer 'walking according to his commands', the love and truth are really endangered. John will not divide a Christian person into compartments! Every part of us affects every other part. The way we behave influences the way we think, as well as vice versa.

This is really rammed home by verse 6b. 'This is the command, as you have heard from the beginning - that you should walk in love!'. Not only is love expressed by a life of obedience to God's commands (v.6a - *cf.* John 14:15,21), but the most central command of all *the* command (the definite article is deliberate), is precisely that we should love one another! There is a beautiful circularity in John's thinking which binds together faith, love and practical Christian living into a unity which matches the unity of body, mind and soul in Biblical thought.

So he makes mutual love not just the most vital Christian duty but sees it as the very essence of Christian existence. If that love is there, then all is well; if it is not, then everything is lacking. And yet it is something which he can exhort 'the lady' to exercise. For, even though it is the essence of what God works in us when he transforms us by his truth, it is nonetheless a virtue which we must strive to have, a command to which we must deliberately respond. It needs to be cultivated and fed and worked at. And this seems to me to be what the 'ecumenical movement' is all about: as we work at loving one another in Christ, so our common communion (or not) in the truth will become clear to us, and our appreciation of that truth will be refined as our love is deepened. And - this is the thought uppermost in John's mind as he moves on into his next paragraph - we will be equipped to avoid being ensnared by deceit.

Vv.7-11 The reason for the exhortation - the peril of deceit; Vv.12-13 Final Greetings

To argue (as Houlden does) that John violates his own love-principle by the stern words in these verses is simply to reveal that he has not understood vv.1-6! Love, as John conceives it, becomes impossible where the truth is not shared. *Concern* may remain, but *love* is a fruit of shared truth (because both are attributes of God and therefore really inseparable). And a violation of love and of truth has already taken place in John's churches - what agony this must have caused him! With 'have gone out into the world' in v.7 we should understand, 'from the church'. He refers to this schism in 1 John 2:19-23 (cf 4:1-3). What precisely was the issue at stake?

At this distance in time it is hard to be sure. It was plainly a disagreement about the person of Jesus and the nature of his humanity - this much we gather clearly from 'who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh' (v.7). But it is difficult to identify the precise heresy which John here renounces. It could be that of the early Gnostic Cerinthus, who taught a kind of adoptionist Christology, maintaining that the man Jesus became possessed by the divine Christ at his baptism, only to be left to die alone on the Cross. (It would be possible to translate v.7, 'who do not acknowledge Jesus to be Christ, coming in the flesh' - i.e. who deny an identity of person between Jesus and the Christ). Or the view John attacks could be more simply the docetic Christology which other early Gnostics espoused - namely, that because the Divine Word cannot by definition be united to fallen flesh, his appearance on earth must have been a mere manifestation like that of 'the angel of the Lord' in the Old Testament. He was not really a man, therefore - that was merely the most convenient way for him to appear.

Both views were motivated by the same presupposition, a desire to distance the divine nature from the world, because of the feeling (shared with paganism generally) that God and matter are irreconcilable opposites that cannot mix. And the consequences of both views were very similar, too. For both, the death of Christ was either not real (how could the Divine die? An absolute contradiction in terms!), or not important (merely the death of the Christ's physical vehicle); and also, the purpose of his coming was no different from that of 'the angel of the Lord' - namely, to deliver a message, not to effect a work of salvation. Salvation therefore depended wholly on our consistent response to the message, and was usually focused around questions like, 'Will we be able to carry out the revealed liturgy properly? Will we be permitted to become full initiates into the mysteries of the revelation? Will we be able to have the required ecstatic experiences?' - etc, etc. So a further consequence of views like these was that salvation became de-ethicised, divorced from a life of consistent obedience to God's commands, and centred on a Jesus who is thought of just as the Leader of a Cult. Provided the adherents of the Cult carried out all the required formulae, they could be assured of salvation. Gnostic Christianity looked very, very different from the apostolic faith, even if it used the same terms!

This all flowed from the unquestioned pagan assumption that

God and 'the flesh' cannot mix, and so either Jesus cannot have been God (so said Cerinthus), or he cannot have been flesh (so said the Docetics). Such a denial, says John, is 'the deceiver and the antichrist' (*par excellence* - v.7b). For the whole apostolic faith depends upon the incarnation: once that is denied, you are dealing with an entirely different religion. 'Watch out for yourselves!' (v.8a): get ensnared in this trap, and you will lose all that you have worked for, however much the new teaching may be described as an 'advance' on the old (in v.9a, 'run ahead' is probably a slogan used by John's opponents). For he who does not maintain 'the doctrine of the Christ' - the doctrine of God made flesh in Jesus - 'does not have God'. It is as simple as that! God does not have scruples about flesh. He has *become* it. So we ought not to be more particular than he is!

To 'continue (abide, dwell, remain) in the teaching' (v.9b) does not just mean to 'go on holding this as an article of belief'. Again, we must not separate mind from heart! This 'abiding' is the communion with Christ and his children in love and truth, which arises from his sharing in our fleshly nature and our common sharing in his Spirit. The translation 'continue' (NIV) is too weak. It is not the *duration or our orthodoxy* which ensures our possession of 'the Father and the Son', but *the depth of our communion* in him. And that communion will be signalled by a loving treasuring of the truths on which it is based!

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That brings us to verses 10-11 and their difficult prohibition of hospitality towards those who have departed from the doctrine of the incarnation. Some have applied this literally and argued that it is wrong to invite Jehovah's Witnesses in off the doorstep! I do not think that this is right. We must bear in mind the nature of the church at the time of writing. With many small congregations all needing to maintain a common fellowship, the ministry of travelling prophets and teachers was vital (as we shall see more particularly when we turn to 3 John). When John writes, 'Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked world' (v.11), he is not teaching a doctrine of guilt by association, but is saying something about the nature of fellowship in the early church. 'Shares in' is the verbal form of the word *koinonia* ('fellowship'). The reception of travelling prophets and provision of their sustenance was one of the greatest ways in which 'fellowships' between congregations of believers was maintained. Each congregation, by the support it gave to the bearers of the Gospel, testified to its adherence to the message it was enabling them to proclaim, and expressed its unity with the other congregations which likewise supported them. The depth and tenderness of this unity is beautifully expressed in John's final greetings in vv.12-13 - and we see there too the the premium that was set on actual physical contact between the separated units of the church, in spite of the difficulty of travel.

Under these circumstances, acceptance of the bearers of the new 'advanced' teaching would have amounted to resignation from the Johannine Connection - the churches grouped around his Gospel. They could not have invited one of the bearers of the new teaching to speak to them without offering sustenance and thus support to his ministry and his religion - it would have been joining a new Connection. Don't do it, says John!

The situation is so different today. It would by no means express the same commitment, to offer hospitality to Jehovah's Witnesses or to others whom we may believe to have departed from the apostolic faith. The modern equivalent would be to write out a Standing Order in their favour. Personally, I feel that it is vital that doors should be held open as widely as possible to those on the fringes of the Christian faith. But we must not use this difference of situation to discount completely the basic point that John is making - namely, that true Christian love and fellowship is only possible on the basis of shared truth. How should we apply this today? This brings us back to the Bishop of Durham and to the problem faced by all who belong to 'mixed' churches. We can summarise the problem like this: seeing that John regarded a denial of the Incarnation as a repudiation of the whole Christian faith, how can we conscientiously exist in institutional fellowship with people who deny it today? Should we seek to exclude them from the church? This problem raises issues which take us beyond 2 John, and evangelical Christians are genuinely divided here. All I can do is attempt a few observations, which seem to be applications of the message of 2 John.

1. The Bishop of Durham seems to me to be full of inconsistency. He denies the empty tomb (or at any rate interest in whether it was empty or not), and yet believes passionately in the resurrection. He overcomes this seeming inconsistency by spiritualising the resurrection - and yet in his political concerns and pronouncements he testifies to belief in a salvation deeply embedded in the flesh. He denies the Virgin Birth because, he says, it tends against the principle of incarnational involvement in the stuff and life of the world, and yet he goes out of his way to make sure that this laudable principle is not expressed in the resurrection. He maintains that Jesus was born 'of the will of the flesh, or the will of a man', and yet avows that he is an orthodox Trinitarian. Personally, I cannot fit it all together.

Under these circumstances, one cannot maintain that a clear denial of 'Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh' has been made. Certainly the Bishop himself would be horrified to be accused of denying the Incarnation. His public doubting has been rather more dramatic than substantial. He needs not to regain the Faith (I believe), but to achieve clarity!

2. Heresy-hunts are thoroughly counter-productive. There is no evidence that John had taken steps to exclude these proto-Gnostics (if that is what they were) from the church. Because of the nature of the church, their 'advance' beyond the basic apostolic faith necessitated the formation of a new 'connection' - so 'they went out from us' (1 John 2:19). John had made the nature of the faith so clear, that they themselves

knew they could not stay. I think that the best approach is to leave it to the consciences of those whose thinking is taking them beyond the bounds of Chalcedon, or Scripture, or Christian traditions ... sooner or later they will find intolerable the pressure of the inconsistency between their views and their ordination vows, or the liturgy, or the faith of their co-religionists, and depart for more congenial shores.

3. But that lays great responsibility on the leaders of the church, whose task it is, like John, to teach the apostolic Gospel with faithfulness and freshness in our day. If they fudge it, if they confuse more than they clarify, if they see their talk as the seeking of a common denominator in all the views actually held in the church, then there will not be a clear apostolic centre in contrast to which variants will become aware of themselves. I have a horrid feeling that the Bishops of the Church of England are doing their best to be all things to all men as they prepare their statement on doctrine in the church in response to the Durham episode. It may well be published before this article, so the reader may be able to add a wry smile at this point - either at my ill-founded evangelical suspicion of Bishops in all forms (the outcome I would hope for!), or at another sad demonstration of the inability of the Anglican church to be unequivocally clear about the central doctrines of the Faith.

We need an *evangelical* commitment to ecumenism, I believe, a determination actually to be united with all those who confess 'Jesus Christ come in the flesh'.

4. The church is very different now, but there must be something we can learn from the tremendous efforts which the Johannine church made to overcome the barrier of distance and to maintain a united fellowship among scattered congregations. We see more of this in 3 John. For me, this means - we must redouble our efforts to overcome the historical and theological barriers which separate us into 'denominations', and which often seem to be far more daunting than they actually are. We need an *evangelical* commitment to ecumenism, I believe, a determination actually to be united with all those who confess 'Jesus Christ come in the flesh', because if we share the truth with them, then we are bound to them in Him, and we need to hearken to John's exhortation to his 'lady', 'I ask that we love one another!' (v.5). We are strangling the truth in us, if we fail to let it lead us to love all who belong to Christ.

'Love and Truth'. Love without truth is sentimentalism. Truth without love is dead orthodoxy. But for John they are even more closely bound than just as the necessary corrective which each needs. They are the two halves of the same coin - both an expression in character and in action of the lovely nature of Him who is both Love and Truth, communicated to us through the Gospel by the Spirit!